

**Using Social Media to Report the News: the good, the bad and the ugly**

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### *I. Introduction*

Social media have changed profoundly the way in which news is distributed and consumed. Time and time again this has been seen in the way news organizations have used new media tools to advance stories and convey information through platforms like Twitter, Facebook, blogs and such video sharing services as YouTube. While the effects of social media have been explored to some extent in Europe (Erdal, 2011) and South Africa (Stassen, 2010), there has not been a great deal of academic research on this topic in the United States. Indeed, trade publications have published an abundance of opinion pieces and commentaries about social media (see Overholser, 2009). Yet there has been a surprising lack of systematic, scholarly examinations of the ways social media have impacted the newsroom. A thorough review of the existing literature revealed that the focus of academics so far has been on either describing the use(r)s of new media or detangling the marketing aspects of social media. Studies pertaining to Facebook, for example, either aim to understand its users or how to measure the ROI of social media marketing. One of the few existing studies on the effects of social media on reporting the news was published in November of 2011 by the Pew Research Center. The groundbreaking study looks at how 13 mainstream media outlets (newspapers, TV, radio and online only publications) used Twitter for a week (“How Mainstream Media,” 2011).

Given the dearth of systematic research on the uses of social media in journalism, this study is an attempt to examine the ways news organizations in the Midwest use social media. In attempting to understand the process, we must first ask a few pertinent questions:

- Who are the people pushing the envelope of social media in the field of journalism?
- Which platforms are they using and in what manner?
- How popular is each platform?
- What is the level of trust in social media and how big of an impact will it have on the future of journalism?

## *II. Methodology*

The sample consisted of news organizations from the Great Plains region of the United States. Focus was placed on local newspapers because of their central role in delivering the news. A recent study by the Pew Research Center indicated that 73 percent of Americans follow closely local news, and newspapers remain their primary source of information for a majority of topics (“72% of Americans,” 2012). The researchers created a sample directory that included all newspapers in the states of Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri and Oklahoma. The media organizations ranged in sizes from the small town newspaper of central Kansas to some of the leading newspapers in cities such as Kansas City, St. Louis and Oklahoma City.

In the fall of 2011, the arduous process of gathering the data began. Thanks to a research grant from Washburn University, the researchers were able to create and post an online survey through SurveyMonkey. In spite of the encouraging pilot tests, the response rate to the online survey turned out to be less than satisfying. Of the 30 media outlets that had initially agreed to be a part of the research, just three of them responded electronically. After several attempts to elicit additional online responses, the researchers opted to switch to a more traditional approach and conduct telephone interviews. While time consuming and laborious to implement, one cannot overlook the positives that were achieved using this mode of data collection. In interviewing the

subjects, the researchers were able to gain unparalleled depth and richness of knowledge. Many times during the phone interviews, there was reasoning behind why a journalist did or didn't use a certain platform that would have been lost had we stayed with the online survey. The phone interviews were an unexpected development, but gave us the chance to achieve the nuance in the data that comes from speaking directly with the subjects. In gaining this depth, a clearer picture can be painted as to how social media are used in those newsrooms. After the completion of the interviewing stage in April of 2012, the process of data analysis began.

### *III. Results*

The results of this study are based on the responses of 30 media outlets from Kansas (n=13), Nebraska (n=4), Missouri (n=8) and Oklahoma (n=5). Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents from each state.

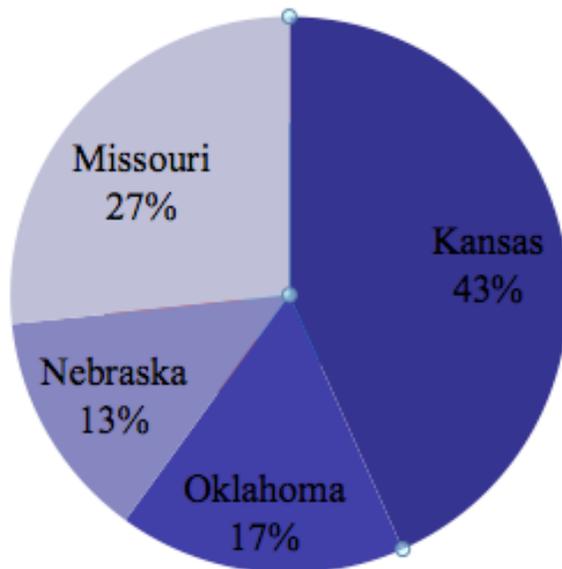


Figure 1. *Percentage of media organizations from each state.*

In attempting to find out just who was behind the social media efforts of these media organizations one thing became quickly obvious. Of the 30 organizations contacted, not a single one of them had someone on staff whose sole purpose was the management of social media. The respondents confirmed that social media was one of the responsibilities they simply had to add to their skill set. This finding also points to a team approach in the industry in which multiple people are using social media to push news out to the public as quickly as possible. This was further supported by the response to the question: “How often does your organization use social media to report the news?” In response, 22 of the organizations said they used it constantly while just five used it several times a day. Three organizations used it once a day. It is worth noting that the three using it just once were also from smaller communities where the news cycle tended to be not so fast paced.

In terms of different platforms used, the data gave an interesting view into which types of social media tended to give the most “bang for the buck.” Not surprisingly, the one that seemed to be universally used was Twitter. With 29 of the 30 respondents saying they used Twitter, we can conclusively say that at least in the region of the country under scrutiny, Twitter has become an accepted social media platform. Delving further into the data, one can see that of the 29 that did use Twitter, 27 of them used it as a professional tool to interface with the community or find additional useful sources for a story. Two of the professionals interviewed said they used it for personal purposes and branding.

The results also revealed that Facebook, one of the giants in the social media field, has also gained a measure of acceptance in the media world. Twenty four of those surveyed said they used it as both a professional news tool and for personal use. Only two used it strictly

professionally, and then only to push stories out and solicit reader opinion on stories. The single response to personal was from an organization where social media had an official account that represented the organization and that person wasn't directly using it. Only three organizations reported that they didn't use Facebook at all.

Interestingly, podcasts, which are acknowledged as a great new media tool, have not seen wide acceptance (at least in the Midwest). Of those surveyed, 23 said they didn't use podcasting as part of their social media efforts. Four organizations indicated that they might use it in the future, but expressed concerns over the time and effort it takes to produce a professional grade podcast. In the words of one of the respondents: "...the rewards for producing a professional podcast are small." Three news organizations, which were bigger in size, reported that they did use podcasts but felt they were an ancillary part of their social media efforts.

As the world of media is very visually driven, both photo sharing and video sites such as Flickr and YouTube were used, though photo sharing was not done through a single commercial platform. Instead, in sharing photos, many organizations used their own, self-designed photo sharing systems to put photos out on social media or the Web. By hosting and linking the photos on proprietary platforms, the ability to continue to control the content was at the center of the issue. Of the organizations sharing photos, 20 used it in a strictly professional manner. The rest either used Flickr exclusively for personal usage or in a combined format, i.e. both personally and professionally.

Video sharing, on the other hand, elicited a very consistent response in terms of a platform used. YouTube was the preferred platform, used by everyone who responded that they did share videos through social media. The majority of the respondents (n=18) also said they

used video sharing as a professional service only. Three news organizations did not use video sharing at all.

Blogging, a popular online writing/publishing activity, elicited mixed response in terms of its professional purpose. Twenty five respondents said they used a blogging service of some kind, most in the last 3-4 years. The distinction, however, from personal and professional leaned more in the favor of personal usage. Most surveyed journalists said they used blogs to express their own personal ideas and opinions on issues that they were interested in talking about. Specifically, of the 25 who did use blogs, 19 of them used them in a personal way. Several respondents indicated they also didn't have the blogs published publicly, and only allowed readers on a private, by invitation only basis.

We also asked Midwestern media organizations to provide us with information about the volume of their social media traffic. Social media have been in existence for years now, with platforms like Facebook and Twitter gaining thousands of new accounts each week. It should not be surprising, therefore, that most of the professionals we surveyed had a decent to large following. On Facebook, just over three-fourths of the media professionals had more than 250 followers, most of whom were readers or viewers from their region.

On Twitter the cutoff seemed to be lower, at just over 100 followers. However, the ceiling on that platform was high with two respondents having more than 1,000 followers on Twitter. The two journalists also happened to be from two of the largest media markets in the area surveyed.

The telephone interviews also allowed us to get a good glimpse at the different reasons behind using social media as a reporting tool. Chart 1 gives the number of journalists who outlined their reasoning behind use of social media. Regardless of whether they were active

social media users, all media professionals valued social media as a tool to gather news, and the majority (n=28) saw social media as an important tool to research information and sources, or promote their news organization (n=27). A similarly high number of journalists saw the value of social media to disseminate breaking news and connect with readers (n=26). The one finding that stood out and was constantly repeated was the value of face-to-face or phone interviews. While social media have gained acceptance as a news distribution tool, media professionals seem to indicate that they are still skeptical of social media as a primary contact and interview tool with potential sources. Much as email interviews are regarded as secondary sources, social media are considered a support tool and not a main venue for gathering first-hand accounts.

**Reasons for using social media**

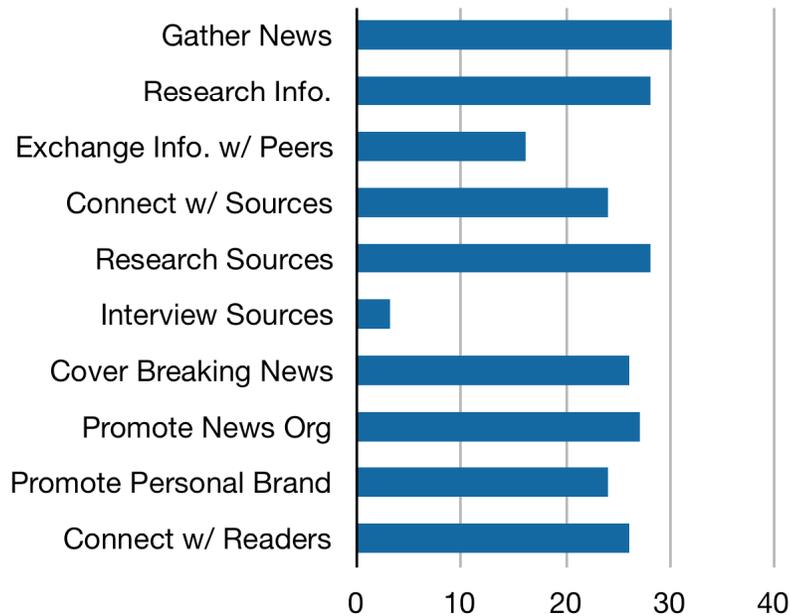


Chart 1. *Reasons for using social media as a reporting tool.*

One interesting finding was generated by respondents' answer to the question whether they trusted social media. In spite of the fact that most of the surveyed media organizations could be described as active social media users, their overall trust of social media was low. Often journalists responded by qualifying their answer in that if the information came from another reputable news source, like another newspaper, then they would trust it. Generally speaking however, 24 of the 30 respondents (or 80 percent) said they were skeptical of social media and would check with other sources to corroborate information.

#### *IV. Conclusion*

This study aimed to shed some light on the ways social media are used by newspapers in the Midwestern region. The results indicate that, indeed, social media are gaining momentum in the field, but journalists remain skeptical of social media as a tool to get reliable information or contact sources. Moreover, while various social media tools are well utilized by the journalists we talked to, it seems that the evolving world of social media is still considered a slice of journalism and not the exclusive purview of anyone in the newsroom.

If one can rate the popularity of different social media tools, Twitter would undoubtedly be on top of the list. This conclusion further reinforces the importance of the Pew Research Study on Twitter as well as the need to conduct additional in-depth research on how news media utilize specific social media platforms. One intriguing finding, for example, was the way journalists characterized blogging as a personal activity in spite of the fact that blogging has become a staple of big mainstream publications. Clearly, additional research is needed to explain why journalists in our sample viewed blogging in such a way.

A future stage for our research would be to expand the sample and/or conduct comparative studies on how newspapers and broadcast organizations differ in their use of social media. One thing is certain, however; all the media professionals that we talked to expressed their belief that social media will remain a growing and vital tool in the world of journalism.

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